

Dear Honorable House Education Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Derek Wheaton and I am the principal of Mattawan Early Elementary School in Mattawan, Michigan. We are a rural district outside of Kalamazoo. My school is a K-2 center. I have 810 students in my building. I have 280 kindergartners this year and expect to have an enrollment of over 300 next year. A little background about me. I graduated from Michigan State University in 1980 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Teaching and Early Childhood Education. My first job was in Los Angeles, California in the LAUSD as an early childhood bilingual teacher, as jobs in Michigan during that recession time were difficult to come by. I moved back to our state in 1985 and taught for the Kalamazoo Public School system for 10 years as an early childhood teacher. In 1988 I was awarded my master's degree in Educational Leadership from Western Michigan University. I have been the principal of the Early Elementary in Mattawan for 17 years and just this year, the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association honored me as the Outstanding Practicing Principal of the year.

I am here today to provide perspective on the issue of the kindergarten start date as it relates to our school and our community. Currently for the 2012-13 school year, we have 240 students signed up with 43 having September 1-December 1 birthdays. We will seat approximately 90 more students on average from now until the first day of school. As usual, we will have approximately 60 students entering school as a four year old. 2/3 of these students enroll in our Young Fives program and the other 1/3 enroll in kindergarten. We support a model that provides choice for parents and welcomes ALL children to school if they are five before December 1. All children are different and it would be best if we had a system that allowed for each individual child to start school when he or she was determined to be "ready." Unfortunately, the prohibitive costs, the way we are organized, and our calendar schedule do not allow for this, thus a set determined day provides a "cut-off" and state funding. Nearly every year that I have been a principal, state education committees and/or legislators have wrestled with the issue of when to provide funds for students to enter kindergarten. I believe that this year, the decision to change the date is simply one about finances and has nothing to do with what is best for the children.

Financially, the decision to change the start date would be devastating to our school and school district. Losing 60 students next school year would mean a revenue loss of over \$400,000 on top of the loss of revenue of almost \$300,000 to implement full day kindergarten in our district. Each year this smaller cohort group will wreak havoc as the students travel through the system, impacting on staffing, classroom space allocation, possibly creating split classrooms, etc.

I realize that other states have moved to a September start date for kindergarten and I believe for the wrong reason. The thought that every child would be "ready" for kindergarten just because they are five is a fallacy. One of the most important aspects of a child being "ready" for kindergarten is the experiences he or she has been immersed in before coming to school. We are finding students enroll who have had much less outdoor play time, much more TV, computer, and game time, no opportunities for creative play, no use of scissors, crayons, or playdough and most importantly, no immersion in a love for reading. How does this play out in the classroom? Children with very limited oral language development, very weak fine motor and gross motor development, no knowledge of basic literacy skills, and problem solving abilities, many who have never held a book in their hand. A child's birth date does not guarantee "readiness" for kindergarten.

Although keeping students out of school for one more year may be of benefit to some, for most students it means just one more year that we will not have an opportunity to intervene and provide for them the rich vocabulary, literacy and numeracy enhanced environment that they need. We can build on a child's strengths and provide for motor development, visual motor development, oral language development, collaboration and problem solving experiences and begin providing the basic pre-school experiences that EVERY child deserves and should come to school with. Some children will have opportunities for enriching pre-school experiences, but many of them will not. Is your plan to take the money you will save in keeping students out of kindergarten and plow that back into early childhood experiences? History in other states where the start date change has occurred have shown that early childhood support has not come to fruition and in fact, more costly propositions implemented with no fairness and equitable distribution of resources.

Your decision to "red-shirt" these students means that parents do not have a choice to send his or her child to school, even if they think they are ready. I for one have a daughter with a November 13th birthday, who went to public school at the age of four, who will be graduating with honors from the University of Michigan this April and has plans to apply for medical school. You see, every child is different and we need to be given flexibility in providing the best education for every child who enters our doors. I am afraid that by diverting resources away from our youngest students will lead to even more difficulty in meeting the requirements set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act and current Race to the Top initiatives and Common Core State Standards.

Just because many other states have changed their kindergarten start dates does not mean that Michigan has to follow suit. Sometimes when we "re-imagine," we determine that we are already doing it right. I certainly hope that you agree, for the sake of the children of the graduating class of 2025 and beyond!

An advocate for our children's future,

Derek Drew Wheaton
Mattawan Early Elementary Principal